Marine Turtle Conservation Fund

Marine turtles are truly the ancient mariners of the world's oceans with ancestors dating back over 100 million years. Seven species of marine turtles currently navigate the oceans. While all species require tropical, subtropical or temperate oceanic beaches for nesting, each has unique marine habitat and feeding requirements.

Six of the seven marine turtle species are listed in threatened categories by the World Conservation Union: green turtle *(Chelonia mydas),* the leatherback *(Dermochelys coriacea),* the loggerhead *(Caretta caretta)*, the hawksbill *(Eretmochelys imbricata)*, the Kemp's ridley *(Lepidochelys kempii)* and the olive ridley *(Lepidochelys olivacea)*. Only the flatback turtle *(Natator depressus)*, which occurs in the near shore and inshore waters of Australia, is listed as data deficient. All marine turtle species except the flatback are also listed as endangered or threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

All marine turtle species require many years to reach sexual maturity *(10- 40 years depending on the species)*, have complex life cycles, depend on oceanic beaches for nesting, require specific marine foraging habitats, and are very vulnerable to human exploitation as well as human caused degradation of their habitats.

Once abundant, marine turtle populations are a fraction of their levels prior to human over-exploitation. Major threats on nesting beaches include legal or illegal exploitation of eggs or meat, depredation of eggs by natural predators as well as dogs and domestic hogs, light pollution from developments which disorients hatchlings and nesting females, and coastal riprap, sea walls, revetments, sand bags or other hard structures. Marine turtles are also subject to manmade disasters involving the world's oceans and beaches such as oil spills. Major threats in the marine environment include legal directed fisheries for marine turtles in some countries, accidental capture by trawl, net and long-line commercial fisheries, and destruction or degradation of grass beds and coral reefs.

While long-term conservation efforts are showing success for some species or populations such as the Kemp's ridley, other nesting populations such as those for East Pacific leatherbacks have crashed and face imminent extinction.

In 2004, the United States Congress passed the Marine Turtle Conservation Act. The legislation was enacted to ensure the long-term survival of these imperiled species, by assisting in the conservation of marine turtles and their nesting habitats in foreign countries. The Act was established in recognition of the global plight of marine turtles and the need for increased conservation efforts on nesting beaches throughout the world. The Act establishes a dedicated fund to support a range of conservation efforts protecting nesting populations and beaches in foreign countries.

Because marine turtles are highly migratory and far ranging species, successful conservation requires long-term efforts and close cooperation among countries sharing the same oceans. While U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has a long history of working with other countries on marine turtle conservation, the fund enables the Service to build new partnerships with governments, non-government organizations and the private sector to achieve this goal.

The Act provides the Service with a timely and important opportunity to expand existing efforts and support for on-the-ground conservation initiatives on behalf of the world's imperiled marine turtles. It is a responsibility that the Service and its many conservation partners take very seriously to help save these ancient and charismatic species.

Olive ridley arribada (Lepidochelys olivacea)***, Ostional, Costa Rica***

The 2010 Congressional appropriation of $2.0 million, which leveraged over $2.7 million in matching funds and in-kind donations from other marine turtle stakeholders, allowed the Service to fund 41 innovative marine turtle conservation projects, including:

- Strengthen international cooperation and collaboration on marine turtle research, management practices and conservation efforts by aiding in the assembly of more than 900 sea turtle specialists from around the world at the Annual Symposium on Sea Turtle Biology and Conservation. In particular, provide travel grants to specialists from developing nations who could not otherwise afford to attend.

- Support management of leatherback nesting at Jamursba Medi and Warmon Beaches in Papua, Indonesia, the largest remaining nesting leatherback population in the West Pacific. The focus of this project is monitoring of the leatherback nesting population, hatchling production, developing threat mitigation protocols and ensuring the effective involvement of local communities in the recovery program for West Pacific leatherback nesting populations.

Data collection and tagging a nesting leatherback (Dermochelys coriacea) ***in Kingere, Pongara National Park, Gabon*** © Maite Ikaran

- Provide support for a community based conservation program to restore the Chiriqui Beach hawksbill nesting population once the largest hawksbill nesting colony in the wider Caribbean. Specifically, the project involves a partnership of scientists, NGOs, government and Ngobe Indian communities.

- Develop a well-coordinated and strategic approach to monitor and protect the West Africa leatherback nesting population, which is one of the two largest remaining nesting populations for this species. The project includes conducting aerial surveys of leatherback nesting sites in Gabon and ground field projects to survey and protect marine turtle nests and nesting females on important nesting beaches in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Equitorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo and Angola as well as working with artisanal fisherman to reduce bycatch mortality.

Ngobe children watch a satellite tagged hawksbill (Eretmochelys imbricata) ***return to the sea, Chiriqui Beach, Panama*** Earl Possardt/USFWS

- Support ranger training and capacity building for the Oman Ministry of Environment & Climate Change and Environment Society of Oman's marine turtle conservation program. The project also includes the implementation of standardized nesting surveys on the Masirah Island loggerhead nesting population to support development of a Masirah Island Protected Area for this nesting population.

- Support development of a coalition of NGOs on Cape Verde to better coordinate and expand protection of the loggerhead nesting population which suffered from the illegal killing of over 25 % of the nesting loggerheads each year as recently as 2008.

Marine Turtle Conservation Funding from 2006 through 2010	
Total Number of Grant Proposals Received	396
Total Number of Grants Awarded	147
Total Amount Appropriated by U.S. Congress	$5,863,800
Total Funds Distributed through Grants	$5,564,000
Total Funds to Administration of Grants	$376,393
Total Matching/In-kind Funds Leveraged by Grants	$8,415,000

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